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MONTANA JOINS 13-STATE CALL FOR US WEST TO INDEPENDENTLY TEST ITS OPERATIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Public utility regulators in 13 of the 14 states served by U S West Communications today asked U S West to join with the states to conduct independent third-party testing of U S West's operational support systems in an effort to ensure the company offers systems that work to its competitors for local phone service and to enable U S West to earn earlier approval to offer full long-distance services in its region.

State utility commissions joining the call for a collaborative approach to plan and conduct the third-party testing are: Montana, Idaho, Utah, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, Colorado, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Iowa and Nebraska. Only the Arizona commission did not sign the letter.

"This proposal serves the interests of U S West, the CLECs [competitive local exchange carriers], the state commissions -- and especially the customers in our 13 states," wrote Iowa Utilities Board chairman Allan Thoms on behalf of the state commissions in the letter containing the proposal that was addressed to U S West chairman and CEO Sol Trujillo.

U S West may not enter the interLATA long-distance market in its region until it demonstrates to the Federal Communications Commission that the local telephone market is fully and irreversibly open in the states it serves. The federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 requires former Bell local phone companies like U S West to satisfy a number of requirements to prove their case that the market is open. One requirement, which has been a major stumbling block for companies seeking entry into their in-region interLATA long-distance markets, is that the company must provide competing local carriers with nondiscriminatory access to its operational support systems so that the competitors are able to compete effectively.

Operational support systems, termed OSS, are the systems a telephone company uses to provide service to its customers, whether these are its own retail customers or competing telephone companies. OSS functions which U S West must provide at the same level to its competitors as it provides to itself are pre-ordering, ordering, provisioning, repair and maintenance, and billing.

The states propose a regionwide collaborative effort among U S West, the states and competing carriers to develop and conduct the OSS testing. According to the states' letter, the purpose of the independent third-party testing will be to "evaluate and demonstrate the operational readiness, performance and capability" of U S West to provide OSS functions on a nondiscriminatory basis to competing local carriers. Reasons cited by the states for beginning a regional collaborative process on OSS include:

- Obtaining regionwide agreement from the states after successful independent third-party testing that U S West's OSS meet the FCC requirements should result in U S West earning earlier approval from the FCC for in-region interLATA long-distance service than if U S West attempted to demonstrate its OSS readiness and capability on a state-by-state basis.
- Because other states have already undertaken collaborative approaches to develop third-party OSS testing, U S West and the states it serves could take advantage of third-party testing methods already developed and do it at a much lower cost per state than would otherwise be possible.

- The proposal recognizes the regional nature of U S West's OSS, which eliminates duplicative work by states and the company and saves everybody time and money over the state-by-state approach.

The states requested a reply to the proposal from U S West within two weeks.

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